

WITH A VIEW OF THE LANDSCAPE

THE POETIC WORLD OF MIRIAM VAN HEE

Anne Marie Musschoot

The Flemish poet Miriam Van hee, born in Ghent in 1952, read Slavonic studies at university and has translated poetry by Anna Akhmatova, Osip Mandelstam and Joseph Brodsky into Dutch. She debuted in 1978 with *Het karige maal* ('The scanty meal') and has since published ten collections, including the anthology *Het verband tussen de dagen. Gedichten 1978-1996* ('The link between the days. Poems 1978-1996', published in 1998). In Flanders and the Netherlands Van hee is a cherished, award-winning poet, and internationally she enjoys an ever-growing reputation thanks to the many translations of her work into German, French, Spanish, Russian, Polish, Swedish, Lithuanian and Afrikaans. She was first introduced in English as one of 'Seven Women Poets from the Low Countries', by Hugo Brems, in the first edition of this yearbook, *The Low Countries I* (1993-1994). Judith Wilkinson later translated an extensive selection of her poems under the title *Instead of Silence* (Shoestring Press 2007).

The special features of Van hee's very consistent poetic world were already established in her first collection: she writes hushed, hesitant, melancholy poems, searching for depth with a whispering, subdued voice and an entirely unique rhythm. The borders of this world are continually being marked out: the observation is determined by the internal space (typified by the title of the second collection, *Binnenkamers*, 'Interior', published in 1980) but the reader's view is also focused on the external space, the distance, that which is out of reach or absent. Attention for the simple, 'ordinary' things surrounding us at the same time reveals a pressing need for the 'other', the need to understand the underlying structures and the unknown. Poetic composition emerges as 'a hesitation between silence and speech', as the poet herself calls it, a form of thinking, a search for clarity and explanation, for existential depth. This poetry is defined by uncertainty, by qualifications such as 'sometimes', 'barely', 'but' and 'however', by questions and answers which remain unspoken, and by penetrating self-perception: 'for we're no gods / not even seemingly / in our dreams' (in 'The scanty meal'). 'Great' feelings are expressed simply and unassumingly, in a manner averse to pathos and reduced to everyday proportions, in language closely resembling natural speech. The longing for distance is suggested by a passing train, a bicycle entering the countryside, and conversely the restricted immediate environment is always linked back to the need to break

away. The longing for security, warmth and contact is paired with a longing for change, escape, distance.

We're not the ones they're waiting for

These opposing poles are conveyed by recurring motifs which give the poems, at first sight so simple and accessible, a great dynamism and liveliness. In her small, intimate world, the poet is involved with the house, garden, husband and children, but the longing for other worlds and landscapes is never far away, bringing restlessness and tension. Direct observation and reflection are always connected. In Van hee's two most gloomy collections, *Ingesneeuwd* ('Snowed In', 1984) and *Winterhard* ('Winter Hardy', 1988), the central motif of winter snow is used with great detachment and objectivity to express the isolation and hopelessness in the 'landscape of desolation'. The poet reflects on herself and her observations. At the same time there is a shift in perspective: the lyrical subject is doubled, adding a third person, or a second person who is directly addressed. Failure, the concept of 'fatal imperfection', is the focal point of these 'wintery' collections. There has been a parting, an emotional failure; what remains is simply the absence of togetherness. The nostalgia for the absent loved one is counterbalanced by an equally strong, even more urgently growing longing for a new future, for light, for distance, for travel, as in the poem 'that's how she'll leave' (see below). In 'Winter Hardy' Van hee consciously seeks out loneliness, because clarity can only be achieved out of the reach of the noise of others: 'until everything is clearly defined / the sun the water / the possibilities'. Looking and asking questions remains a way of registering loss:

*we're not the ones
they're waiting for
we're waiting ourselves for the morning
for our benefits for the first
tram, we're not the ones
who slot in we look
slowly out of the window
the voice fallen silent
still in the hand*

The lyrical subject attempts to shield itself, to protect itself by cultivating habits ('habits to stave off the emptiness'). The space that accommodates the watchful waiting, the silent

listening, the remembrance of unfulfilled togetherness, remains as desolate as usual: the foliage is rusty, there is snow, bald roadsides, railways and stations, bicycles in the landscape, even freight ferries and now airports, but especially windows – windows through which people look ‘slowly’ and longingly.

In the collections of the 1990s, *Reisgeld* (‘Travel Money’, 1992) and *Achter de bergen* (‘Behind the Mountains’, 1996), however, the poetry turns a corner, as indicated in the titles, reflecting a turn of events in the poet’s personal life. The desolation is interrupted, confinement and loneliness are replaced by new love and travel. The word ‘happiness’ even occurs, albeit in the context of ‘sums’ of ‘happiness and unhappiness’. New landscapes open up, both literally and figuratively. The French landscape of the Cévennes, where the poet stays for extensive periods in summer and winter, becomes a particular source of inspiration. This landscape is not threatening to the poet because she grants herself space and is able to transform it to human proportions: the house, the garden, the trees and the wind, the terrace, the river, the stones, ‘the scent of blooming broom flowers’ which remind her of Moscow. The experiential world of the lyric subject is never free of tensions; her searching and questioning are expressed in poems which represent attempts to ‘bring her being together’. The classic themes of melancholy and fear are resumed here: fear of losing happiness and love again, melancholy over the uncertainties, the transience of things, all those unanswered questions. As in the poem ‘les gorges du tarn’:

*it's melancholy because we're
not there, because we were nowhere
so alone and together
as here under the blue sky
and we ask ourselves questions
which are not questions
our lives in the solar system
where to and where from*

But melancholy and fear can go their way here together in peace, trust and acceptance. The final poem of the cycle ‘Behind the mountains’, which ends the collection of the same name, reads as follows:

and I thought everything was in place

*the deep blue of the sky
and our purple shadows
over the snow*

This final chord expresses a rare phase of serenity in Van hee's world view.

Light brings transparency

The title of Van hee's latest collection, *Ook daar valt het licht* ('There too falls the light', 2013), is a variation on two verses from one of the poems, 'in the suburb': 'but here too fell the light in which everything had / to be seen'. In this collection, as in Van hee's previous work, it is light which truly makes things clear, transparent, allowing us to understand what 'the I' (also referred to as 'she') sees and what she remembers. We read in *De bramenpluk* ('Blackberrying', 2002) that 'light does not comfort / the point is / that it changes, / disappears and returns_ wherever sadness may come from. There are things which remain, catching the sunlight, if only temporarily: the light will not be lost, 'even when we / are gone'. The light here is a way of giving meaning, forming an image for Van hee which expresses the transience, the fleetingness of things. Paradoxically, the changeable light represents a positive, stable value in a world of uncertainty: the light will always be there, even when we are gone.

However, it is not time itself that is most prominent in this collection, but rather space, the locations in which things are fleetingly observed or stored in memory. 'Time is abstract,' we are told in one of the two *Brieven uit het noorden* ('Letters from the North', written for the birthday of the Flemish poet Leonard Nolens): 'it helps if you provide something concrete / in exchange, wash glasses, write letters or go on / a journey'; and 'light makes the landscape transparent, and / ourselves'. There is a great deal of looking in Van hee's poetry, not only in the here and now, but also there, on a journey or in the remembered past. In her previous collection *Buitenland* ('Foreign Country', 2007) most of the poems were devoted to journeys or the now familiar landscape of the Cévennes. In the latest collection these 'distant' images are still present, but the emphasis is on the immediate surroundings in which the poet grew up, on the space of the past. These memories were present earlier in her poetry but are presented here for the first time in a separate series of poems.

Home is where one starts from

The collection begins with several ‘separate’ poems, not in series, with the familiar ‘views’ of the village and the mountains. The gaze here primarily registers the ‘spots of light’ moving on the road, or the road itself in the snowy landscape; the middle of the road itself is marked with ‘shining dots’ which provide a safe guideline between the snowy edges. The view from the plane registers the temporary nature of things and the great absence which pervades everything, the view from a rock in the landscape itself shows how deceptively quickly the light can disappear. As always with Van hee, there are quickly alternating moods which almost dance along with the flickering sunlight: the sense of duality skims over things that are briefly present but then give way or cease to be. The small, concrete detail also encapsulates the great and the abstract: the trembling ripples in the morning coffee summon up the ‘awakening grief’ of the coming autumn. But despite the continually melancholy keynote of Van hee’s poetry there is a never-ending tendency towards movement, towards breaking free, a longing to escape and ‘go outside’. As in the penetrating ‘once so far’, in which the poet makes a firm choice to seek out a familiar part of the world: ‘let’s take the uncertain path / to be certain,’ with the particularly beautifully formulated concept, ‘there will always / be something we recognise, the yielding // ground under the pines we so loved.’ This poetry exhibits a virtuosity of language and imagery which only comes into its own with repeated reading.

Between the two groups of poems presented as series, ‘Het nulpunt’ (‘Zero’) and ‘Station Gent Dampoort’ the two ‘Letters from the north’ are placed as a hinge, reading as key poems in Van hee’s work: the poet, who has become increasingly conscious of form, searches for words to interpret the light, to set concrete things in opposition to abstract, elusive time. A key to reading the first series is also presented in the form of the quote from Herta Müller: ‘Zero is the indescribable,’ in which a few dreams are summoned into a world that can barely be named. Here the light comes ‘hesitantly’, ‘inconspicuously’, there is a journey with an ‘empty destination’ and a lane reveals a ‘translation’ of the wind and the light. The autobiographical commemorative cycle ‘Station Gent Dampoort’ is striking in Van hee’s work, with a motto by T.S. Eliot: ‘Home is where one starts from.’ For Van hee it all started in Sint-Amandsberg, the suburb of Ghent where she grew up. The titles of the poems refer very precisely to existing places, in the broad surroundings of the station. There are the streets and the houses where she lived and dreamed. This is an environment in which she deliberately learnt to observe, where she looked for connections and from where she is ‘drawn into the world’: here, by a bus stop, there was ‘always something to see’. The longing to begin, to leave, to enter the countryside, originates here, and the memory is as concrete as the reality,

always in search of ‘what’s missing’. The series on Van hee’s home city also contains a little pearl with the title ‘op de watersportbaan’ (‘the water sports course’), which summons up the image of her father rowing: cycling on the bank beside him, she sees him rowing backwards towards land.

Seeing what others do not

It is not easy to penetrate the essence of these apparently accessible poems. Van hee suggests more than she says, leaves many thoughts unfinished and only renders glimpses of her reality. Spatial elements are evoked by a handful of images, or sounds which reveal the silence, in sentences which reflect a fleeting experience with minimal words. Silence can be described ‘by wind, rain, fluttering / and further away a lorry / climbing the slopes / and moving earth’. The experience of love is ‘described’ by a simple image of the loved one in the doorway. Sometimes the everyday also reveals the sublime, there is a momentum that flashes up in the consciousness of the lyrical ‘I’. Composition, which for Van hee is ‘thought’ and with which she attempts to gain insight into her own existence, makes her see things others do not. The poem ‘for Jacob and Menno’ answers the hypothetical question of ‘what a poet was’: ‘that I could not know – as usual – what I should reply’. After this hesitation, however, she adds that a poet sees in daily reality what ‘others’ do not see: as on the occasion when she stood waiting for the train and ‘saw a feather / sticking straight up out of the stones [...] pushed through / to the light / to reveal itself’. Writing is also ‘digging up what is buried’, and that ‘digging up’ can also be achieved through simple concentration on details. It is about a kind of alienation which in literary theory was seen as the essence of literature or, by extension, of art in general: the ‘ordinary’ can be isolated and examined in such a way that it becomes extraordinary. The focus on details leads to alienation, divergence.

With Van hee all this is paired with a precise, sharply refined formulation and an entirely individual rhythm which is barely perceptible on the first reading. The verses have very little punctuation, hardly a full stop or a comma, here and there a question mark (sometimes the only punctuation is a question mark in the middle of a poem). They are structured by rhythm, by a few blank lines and lots of enjambment, running sentences across verse boundaries. The most recent collections are even free of capital letters. This austere, hushed, subtle poetry might appear simple; it is a carefully thought-through simplicity which penetrates to the essence of things.

Translated by Anna Asbury

Five Poems

1.

The scanty meal

Under the lamp across the table
silently we eat; our hands
like white flecks dart to and fro;
our ringed fingers heedlessly
playing with the familiar bread.

There is no joy nothing special
in the sound of our
knives and forks.

And of course we feel nothing
of the happiness of travellers
in an evening train.

2.

| that's how she will leave
slow and unflinching,
as happens in dreams

no gesture she will wonder
about no words about
which she'll feel shame
no hand that will restrain her
no outburst of anger to disturb her gaze

that's how she will leave
before crack of day,
soundlessly as in dreams
and always something forgotten, a bunch of keys
an address, warm clothes, the station where –
leaving and yet staying
waiting snowed in

3.

May on the A75

the scent of blooming broom flowers
made me think of Moscow
that's what the airport smelled of, the underground
or was it the footpaths
after such a cloudburst as never
stopped anyone
from his quest for what
is bygone or unattainable

just for a moment though
you are caught up in
something else and you search
to bring together again
what was interrupted, warily
and haltingly to make a path
around the lakes.

I don't write this to say
I've done this or been there
I write to bring together
my being

4.

Light

light from another season,
creamy and white, has entered
the room gliding
slowly over the cupboard,
the Russian teapot, and falling
on the photo of a family
sitting round the table, one
day in the summer: cake, lemonade
in long slow draughts

light does not comfort
the point is
that it schanges,
disappears and returns

wherever sadness may come from

5.

the water sports course

there goes my father down to the water in a little boat
he rows with slow strokes in between each pull

it is still, he stirs his oar in the water
he makes ripples that reach the banks later

at a spot I'm no longer at, I'm cycling along the shore
I shout that he's doing seven and a half per hour

he sits with his back to my view, he sees
the spot where we were, I see what's coming , he's wearing

a Kirghiz hat, not a real one but one
of shot cotton because there is too much wind

for a cap, he says, and on his feet he's wearing
galoshes that belonged to his father-in-law

and which don't come off, he says, should he fall
into the depths, he loved the water,

as he did my mother because, as he used to let
slip, out there in the ocean she was all he missed,

and what about us then, I thought and waved him

goodbye, he couldn't wave back, I called

but he couldn't hear me, he was rowing, it looked
as though it was effortless, slowly he performed

his earthly task, looking at me now and then
on the bank, maybe he was moved but you

couldn't see from here, it could just as easily
have been a game I didn't know the rules of

and I thought I could leave him there, the water
understood him and carried him backwards

back to the land

All poems translated by Donald Gardner